

Ra'iatea & Taha'a

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Best Places to Stay

- » Sunset Beach Motel (p118)
- » Raiatea Lodge (p118)
- » Opoa Beach Hotel (p117)
- » Titaina (p123)
- » Vahine Island Private Island Resort (p124)
- » La Pirogue (p124)

Best Places to Eat

- » Opoa Beach Hotel (p118)
- » Tahaa Maitai (p124)
- » La Pirogue (p125)
- » Chez Louise (p125)

Why Go?

Ra'iatea and Taha'a are encircled by a common lagoon, but here you get two very different islands for the price of one. Ra'iatea is high, imposing and fiercely independent, has the second biggest town in French Polynesia after Pape'ete and is considered by many to be the spiritual seat of the Polynesian Triangle. Taha'a, on the other hand, has graceful low hills, is famous only for its sweet-scented vanilla and is arguably the quietest of the Society Islands. Neither island gets many tourists, making them the ideal place to explore a mysterious and wild-feeling Polynesia.

The islands have very few beaches. Fortunately the reef is dotted with *motu*, white-sand gems that can fulfil anyone's dreams of a palm-fringed, blue-lagoon paradise. Within the vast lagoon itself is a never-ending aquarium perfect for diving, snorkelling, kayaking or just splashing around. On land, the mountains, particularly on Ra'iatea, make you want to strap on your hiking boots in search of breezy vistas, waterfalls and one of the world's rarest flowers, the *tiare apetahi*.

When to Go

The dry winter period from May to October is the best time to go; the weather is cooler and there is much less rainfall during this time – perfect for outdoor activities, especially hiking. In July both islands are in full swing with the Heiva cultural festivities, including dancing contests. The Hawaiki Nui canoe race (p230) in early November is another highly colourful event. Diving is popular year-round.

RA'IA TEA

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Ra'iatea is the second largest of the Society Islands after Tahiti and also the second most important economic centre, but its lack of beaches has left it relatively off the tourist radar. What dominates here are the high, steep mountains and the vast, reef-fringed lagoon – the combination of the two are quite awe-striking and can make you forget that there's no beach. The capital, Uturoa, is the only town of significance; explore the rest of the island and you'll find an intensely calm, back-to-nature reality.

Ra'iatea was home to Marae Taputapuatea, the most important traditional temple in Polynesia, which many believe still exudes power today. What is undeniable is that the island emanates a hard-to-pinpoint, mysterious energy that you won't feel anywhere else in French Polynesia.

History

Ra'iatea, known as Havai'iki Nui in ancient times, is the cultural, religious and historic centre of the Society Islands. According to legend, Ra'iatea and Taha'a were the first islands far to the northwest to be settled, probably by people from Samoa.

Cook first came to the island on the *Endeavour* in 1769, when he anchored off Opoa. He returned in 1774 during his second Pacific voyage, and in 1777 he made a prolonged visit before sailing to Hawaii on his last voyage.

Protestant missionaries came to Ra'iatea in 1818 and from here continued to Rarotonga in the Cook Islands in 1823 and to Samoa in 1830. Following the French takeover of Tahiti in 1842 was a long period of instability and fierce Ra'iatean resistance. It was not until 1888 that the French attempted a real takeover of the island, and in 1897 troops were sent to put down the final Polynesian rebellion.

Sights

We recommend hiring a vehicle and driving the 98km sealed-road circuit around Ra'iatea. Exploring the island this way gives you the opportunity to experience not only its wild natural beauty but also its relaxed atmosphere.

The following sights are listed clockwise around the island.



Ra'iatea & Taha'a Highlights

- 1 Feeling the power of **Marae Taputapuatea** (p112), one of Polynesia's greatest spiritual centres
- 2 Kayaking to *motu* in either lagoon or up **Faaroa River** (p113), the country's only navigable waterway
- 3 Diving the **Nordby** (p113), a superb wreck very close to shore
- 4 Taking an unforgettable hike to **Temehani Plateau** (p116) and looking for the *tiare apetahi*, one of the world's rarest flowers
- 5 Absorbing the silence on the deserted **Motu Oatara** (p112) and snorkelling in crystal-clear waters
- 6 Spending a day on Taha'a with an island tour, stopping at **Motu Tau Tau** (p121) for a bout of snorkelling
- 7 Learning how vanilla is prepared and purchasing a sweet-scented vanilla pod at a **vanilla farm** (p121)
- 8 Unwinding on blissful **Joe Dassin Beach** (p121), Taha'a's hidden gem